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SECRETARY MCKAY OPPOSES TRANSFER OF WICHITA REFUGE LANDS TO ARMY

Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay said today that he is unalterably opposed to a proposed transfer of land of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma to the Department of the Army.

In a letter to Secretary of the Army Wilber M. Brucker, Secretary McKay said: "I trust that it will be possible to meet the basic needs of the Fort Sill expansion program without impairing the integrity of the Wichita Refuge."

The Department of the Interior has offered, Secretary McKay pointed out, to set aside a large area adjoining Fort Sill as a safety or buffer zone during firing periods and to assist in the establishment of necessary firing sites within the refuge.

"Under this proposal," he declared, "the integrity of the refuge would be preserved, the wildlife would be protected, and the public could use the buffer zone during periods when the Army was not firing. This proposal contemplates no transfer of refuge lands but would be an extension of the use of the area under the existing special use permit from the Fish and Wildlife Service."

Secretary McKay's letter was in reply to letter from Secretary Brucker on October 18 which requested that 10,700 acres of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge be withdrawn from all forms of appropriation under the public land laws, including the mining and minerals leasing laws, and reserved for the use of the Department of the Army.

Secretary Brucker also requested amendment of the special use permit to provide for continued use by the Department of the Army of another 19,844 acres of land within the boundaries of the refuge.

"I have reviewed the testimony to which you drew my attention in your letter," Secretary McKay wrote Secretary Brucker. "I am aware that both the Bureau of the Budget and the Congress authorized the expansion of Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in order to meet vital defense requirements. I cannot agree, however, that the testimony in justification of the Fort Sill expansion program in any way authorized the transfer of land within the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge from the Department of the Interior to the Department of the Army. I am unalterably opposed to such a transfer."

Secretary McKay has asked Assistant Secretary Wesley A. D'Ewart to contact Secretary Brucker personally in order to give him the full details regarding the Interior Department's counterproposal which was first presented to the Department of the Army on May 13, 1955.

"I am hopeful that these discussions will result in a mutual understanding which will preserve the wildlife and scenic resources of the refuge without hindering the vital national security operation at Fort Sill," Secretary McKay said.

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